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ABSTRACT

Recent insights on how the brain functions suggest that people learn in holistic contexts, and that the brain does not work well when presented with isolated pieces of knowledge. A lesson for teaching third graders about letter writing illustrates how such insights can be useful in the language arts classroom. The goal of this letter-writing lesson is the spontaneous generation of letters and their use as a communication tool. The lesson begins by using various ways to establish the theme that letters are a means for communicating across a distance. Letter-writing activities in class focus on letters with a real communication purpose for the child, thus giving them personal experience with this tool in a way that touches their personal lives. A display shows a wide variety of letters appropriate for children. The current Alabama Basic Competency Test (BCT) objective number III-1 for language arts, grade 3, is to "recognize the parts of a friendly letter." However, the parts of a letter are meaningful units only to the person who has used letters as a communication tool. Therefore, this BCT objective should be deleted. True assessment of the child's letter writing ability should be done by the teacher and the objective should reflect the child's awareness of and ability to use this authentic communication tool. (SR)

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"DISTINGUISHING RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT PRACTICES FOR TEACHING LETTER WRITING IN EARLY GRADES"

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Running Head: Letter Writing

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OUTLINE

I. INSIGHTS
   - A. Brain Functioning - Holistic
   - B. Knowledge Structure - Piecemeal
   - C. Letter Writing - Identifying the Figures

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
   - A. Mastery of a Communication Tool
   - B. Lincoln & Suid - Flexible Format
   - C. Crowhurst - Pen-friends
   - D. Flickinger - University Education Students as Pen Pals
   - E. Dorotik & Betzold - Adults Coming Out of Illiteracy
   - F. Crowhurst - Authentic Experiences
   - G. Dittmer - Powerful Language

III. LESSON FOR TEACHING LETTER WRITING
   - A. Grade 3
   - B. Evaluation - Questionnaire to Parents
   - C. Rethinking Irrelevant Practice
   - D. Traditional Lessons
   - E. Teacher's Individually-Designed Letters
   - F. Video
   - G. Writing a Family Member
   - H. Display of Letters
   - I. Identification of Common Elements
   - J. Classroom Mailboxes
   - K. Discovery of Changes

IV. ALTERNATIVE TO THE BCT OBJECTIVE
   - A. Current Objective
   - B. Memory of Format vs. Empowerment
   - C. Assessment of Utilization

V. CONCLUSION
   - A. Reflection Upon Curriculum
   - B. Strong Content Theme
   - C. Generalizing to Life Outside School

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ABSTRACT This paper uses a lesson for teaching letter writing to illustrate how the insights from the literature on brain functioning can be useful in the language arts classroom. Traditionally, children are exposed to letter writing in the early grades with a goal of learning the different parts of a letter. Seldom what students learn generalizes to their own lives outside school. This presentation discusses how knowledge of how such a lesson might encourage the spontaneous generation of letters and their use as an authentic communication tool.

INSIGHTS

Recent insights on how the brain functions suggest that people learn in holistic contexts (Iran-Nejad, Marsh, and Clements, 1991). The brain does not work well when presented with isolated pieces or when piecemeal learning is involved. Instead the brain functions at a much higher level and is actually very effective at integrating multiple sources simultaneously. That is why presenting the whole theme is more effective than presenting isolated pieces in hopes that it will be integrated into a whole, as knowledge structure theorists would have us to believe (Anderson, 1990). Instead of building one piece of isolated knowledge onto another, as is commonly practiced, the literature on how the brain functions suggests that a theme be set and then we can pay attention to the individual concepts in the context of the holistic theme. Only after the theme has been well established, can the individual concepts be well understood. Any area of the curriculum would have served the purpose of setting a strong, rich theme and then focusing on the figures. For this paper I will

use the teaching of letter writing in the third grade to illustrate how the whole-theme idea can be used as an alternative to the traditional piecemeal curriculum.

Having taught third grade and serving as an administrator for the Alabama Basic Competency Test (BCT) for the last three years, I feel that the process of teaching letter writing is a detailed and frustrating matter for the students struggling to learn the positions, punctuations, and purposes of the five basic parts of a friendly letter: heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature. Questions on the BCT include, for example, four boxes with a variation of a heading in each. The child is asked to identify which one is correct by choosing its letter. Other questions include such things as "Dear Aunt Jill," and ask the child to identify in which part of the letter this would be found: body, heading, greeting, or closing. The reason that items like these are so confusing to students is because a firm communication theme was never established; instead unrelated details of a friendly letter are drilled to the point of recognition and the format is isolated from the communication theme. Is this skill of identifying the figures of a letter necessary? So far, the focus has been on knowledge and preparation for the BCT.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Traditional teaching programs for letter writing in the early grades often emphasize learning the different parts of the letter: the heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature. In Alabama, the BCT (Basic Competency Test) for third graders consists of letter parts for children to identify by name. In talking to other teachers

and drawing on observational experience of both teaching materials and practices, it seems that most teachers allow letter writing to the extent that the children indent the heading, closing, and paragraphs; include appropriate information in the heading; capitalize appropriately; and punctuate with commas where needed. Little emphasis seems to be placed on letter writing as a tool for communicating at a distance. It is not surprising that few children get a firm feeling for this tool and want to use it spontaneously. With these methods of teaching letter writing, students seldom figure out that they are mastering a communication tool.

Lincoln and Suid (1983) suggested that format is much more flexible than this and that the feelings and ideas expressed are more important. They presented many variations of the traditional model, including spiral letters and chain letters to name a few. Crowhurst (1991) offered that children will try to conform to a standard model and improve their letter writing if they correspond with older "pen-friends" who use the model. Flickinger (1991) offered that university education students make great pen pals for third graders because they can model appropriate letter-writing skills and in return they gain insight into the elementary child. Dorotik and Betzold (1992) revealed favorable results from a pen pal relationship between third graders and adults coming out of illiteracy. The lessons learned from the children were strong enough to instill a desire to learn the language, the observation of its importance, and a determination to stay in school. Crowhurst (1992) wrote that

letter writing skills must emerge through authentic experiences and should not necessarily come from instruction by the teacher.

Dittmer (1991) reminded us of the powerful language of letters and the real audience that letters are intended to reach. He used famous letters obtained from the National Archives to show the emotion and revelation of feeling. He argued, "Why should anyone, and especially children, be forced to learn the rules of inside address, headings, spacings, margins, and other standard formats for writing letters, when all of this is the touch of a key away on most basic computers?" Furthermore, as is evident in most colleges, universities, and large businesses, electronic communication is the way of the future and learning its use seems to be a critical component of human communication.

LESSON FOR TEACHING LETTER WRITING

The following explanation of a lesson has been designed as an attempt to begin the process of rethinking the teaching strategies in terms other than those currently practiced in the piecemeal curriculum. The lesson is designed for grade three and the goal is the spontaneous generation of letters and their use as a communication tool. Evaluation of the use of letters will be done through a questionnaire sent home to parents.

It is important to note that this lesson is also designed to meet a K-3 requirement in a new way. The implementation would occur among the constraints of meeting a basic requirement in the early grades, as dictated by the "part learning" curriculum guides. Justification for teaching this is possible because the

basic format of friendly letters is a useful tool in our daily lives. If we are to take the insights from the literature of how the brain functions seriously, then we must begin to rethink some of the irrelevant ways of teaching, and replace them with their relevant counterparts.

Most lessons on letter writing begin with analyzing the parts of an example letter in a textbook before a communication theme is ever established. Before this is done, the children need to establish the theme that letters are a means of communicating across a distance. One way to do this is for the teacher to send individually-designed letters to each child in the classroom. The teacher will communicate through letters with the child before and after this lesson. The purpose for doing this is so the communication theme can be set. It is important that children are exposed to letters in a natural setting and are given personal experience with this tool in a way that touches their lives.

Children will be shown a video of a child composing a letter to a friend or relative and verbalizing the thought processes and reasons for certain procedures. This will serve to further develop the theme of communication. The child writing the letter will be shown mailing the letter and the teacher will reinforce that this is one way of communicating across a distance. What are other ways? (Traveling to speak to the person, telephone conversation, etc.)

It is important that students do not see the letter writing activities as assignments. If the communication theme is

well-established, then there will be a natural motivation to participate in the process. Also, if the students know that they can write letters that are accepted for their own unique format, then they are more likely to be risk-takers and plunge into the process. Therefore, the students will not be matched with pen pals from the class by random drawing, because in the real world we are not given someone to write to without a purpose and then construct a letter. We begin with a communication purpose and then create the letter. Instead, the children may choose to write a family member. It is helpful if the children write to someone older with whom they have an existing personal relationship. They will be more ready to communicate.

A display of a wide variety of letters appropriate for children, including historically significant letters, letters from community members, and letters for different purposes (persuasion vs. gratitude) to name a few, will be provided. Children should be helped to understand the communication power behind these letters. (For example, former president Nixon's resignation letter was one sentence long.)

Students will be asked to identify common elements from the letters in groups of three and then discuss with the class.

Students are encouraged to write as many people as they would like, and as often as they desire. The teacher will share letters that are written by him/her. Students will have mailboxes (made out of lunchroom commodity cheese boxes) and may communicate with each other and the teacher as they see fit.

Students will be allowed to discover necessary changes in their letters, as the correspondence method strengthens. This can only happen after the communication theme has been well-established. A sample of a letter modeling the final intended features will be displayed in the classroom for students to use as they see fit.

ALTERNATIVE TO THE BCT OBJECTIVE

The current BCT objective number III-1 for language arts, grade three is "Recognize the parts of a friendly letter." The format/item type is stated as follows: "Given four friendly letters, the student will choose the friendly letter that is written in the correct form." This calls for the students to command full attention to all of the parts of the letters presented. Many students have remarked to me that they need not read a word on the page; instead they visually scan the four choices and pick the one that is "blocked off right." The students are required to pick among (a.) friendly letters written in correct form, (b.) friendly letters written with the omissions of the greeting, closing, name and/or date, and (c.) friendly letters with a misplaced heading, greeting, body, and/or name. A student who picks the correct format among the four letters is seen to have mastered friendly letters. However, the contention is that the child is only able to determine which letter meets the structural criteria, which leads to a deemphasis on the power of this authentic communication tool and its usage. The true concern should be the child's ability to write letters and his/her awareness of this tool as a means of communicating across a distance. Few would argue that this ability, assessed by the BCT, generalizes to life outside of school.

Rather than consuming time with activities in the early grades that require children to memorize formats out of their authentic contexts, and demonstrate the ability to do so, as educators, we need to be empowering them with the ability to use these authentic tools. It seems useless to learn the parts of something without having a considerable amount of experience with what that something is. The parts of a letter are important and meaningful units only to the person who has used letters as a means of communication and has discovered that it is helpful, for example, to include one's own address for correspondence purposes.

Therefore, if we take the literature on how the brain functions seriously, we should delete this BCT objective and reflect a consideration for the child's ability to learn in a holistic context. Instead of choosing among alternative letter forms for the correct one, I propose that students be assessed of their writing abilities separate and apart from the BCT. True assessment of this ability should be done by the teacher and the objective should reflect the child's awareness and ability to use this authentic communication tool. Only after this has been established can we begin to teach and assess adherence to a particular letter format.

CONCLUSION

Most any subject would have served as an example to show how irrelevant practices in the traditional curriculum can be changed to reflect more relevant practices, as based on the literature of how the brain functions. As educators we must begin to reflect upon curriculum areas that cause children great stress and areas that teachers dread to approach year after year because the children

"don't seem to get it." We must begin to ask ourselves if we have set a strong content theme before we begin to introduce the pieces of that content. Finally, we must ask ourselves if what we are teaching and assessing generalizes to the students' lives outside school.

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